



Anastasia Piliavsky, ed., *Patronage as Politics in South Asia*

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If, as Tim Ingold (1992, 696) writes, “Anthropology is philosophy with the people in,” political anthropology is political theory with people’s lived experiences, evaluations, and expectations in. What better way, indeed, to understand “the political” in South Asia (or anywhere) than listening to and observing those variously engaged in it? *Patronage as Politics in South Asia* does just that. In doing so, its editor and contributors recognize how—high-flying political philosophies and theories notwithstanding—democracy (and political life more widely) is simply a set of social relations: an arrangement between persons concerning governance and political authority and their discrepant roles and expectations in it. Anastasia Piliavsky poses in her incisive introduction, “what is democratic representation if not a social relation?” (29). If the form and meaning of social relations diverge from one society to the next, so, consequently, does the social substance of democracy. That democratic politics and lifeworlds are everywhere socially enmeshed and reworked into historically evolved contexts, moral values, and cultural circumstances is an observation many liberal theorists, and their ventriloquists, find difficult to accept, even perceive. But this book’s sixteen essays (preceded by a foreword by John Dunn and an introduction by Anastasia Piliavsky) jointly show postulated models of modern, liberal democracy and of the “good political life” are just that: normative models and “as if systems” that superficially abstract that which cannot be abstracted from the pre-existent moral and political gloss of the land. “The land,” here, is South Asia, a place, in all its diversities and complexities, that increasingly claims central stage in the study of our modern political condition.

Anthropologists, John Beattie (1964, 12) argued long ago, should study two things: first, those social relations that are “standardized, institutionalized, and so characteristic of the society being investigated,” and, second, the ideas and values associated with these social relationships. In South Asia, it is patron–client relationships that make one such characteristic practice and value. It is the history, persistence, and moralities of patronage in South Asian political life that this book engages, through both historical and ethnographic excursions. Even as the contributors (wisely) refrain from adopting a single definition of patronage and variously celebrate, criticize, and convict its many manifestations, they all agree that patronage remains etched—as a value, idiom, practice, and critique—at the heart of South Asian political life. They also agree that patronage is best approached as a “living moral idiom” (4) that operates in a complex moral multiverse in which “relational principles” (13) and values of munificence, mutual dependencies, and “hierarchical reciprocity” (366) create political bonds and loyalties that last.

While not everyone may agree with Anastasia Piliavsky that “in the social sciences patronage has had its day” (4), many ethnographers do document relations of patronage in their work, or even in the academic settings in which they write (Peacock 2016). Patronage politics certainly finds no place in normative, Weberian projections of what

modern, liberal democracy should look like; votes, after all, should not be bartered, and impersonal governance should supersede clientelistic exchanges, while politicians are expected to behave as *servants* of the public good, not as powerful patrons who provide and protect their devotee voters. This position has its adherents among mostly middle- and upper-class citizens in South Asia, but less so among the poorer, more vulnerable sections of the society, for whom patronage, in its many forms and guises, is coterminous with politicians and politics. It is the very moral framework, as most of the chapters variously conclude, through which they engage in politics, formulate their political demands, and evaluate their political representatives. Put differently, patronage, across South Asia, is not a dying remnant of a pre-modern past, soon to be swallowed by India's new modernity, but nourishes a contemporary political sociality and structure of political morals that are at once historically traceable and contested, but also scripted and evaluated afresh. Besides delving into the moral depths of patronage, the authors also, both explicitly and implicitly, use the study of patronage as a stepping stone leading to other questions, such as South Asian manifestations and meanings of the public good, political ideology, public sphere, political representation, and even corruption. These are fundamental fields of inquiry, into which sets of insights are offered.

In South Asia, "patronage politics" is everywhere just around the corner, both in the past and present. A tour around the region, as this book offers, shows this. In traditional Tibet, to start with, the polity took the form of a governmental diarchy between the "preceptor-donee" and ruler and lay donors, although it is not always clear, as Seyfort Ruegg (chapter 2) shows, whether the vocabulary of patronage does justice to this relation, or, for that matter, "who 'patronises' whom?" (69). Traveling south and bypassing Nepal (to which, unfortunately, no chapter is devoted), we arrive in northern India where Beatrice Jauregui (chapter 10) invites us into a police *thana* to show how the production of First Information Reports (FIRs), central to India's legal system, are often not the result of legal-rational proceedings but subject to interpersonal relations of exchange, negotiations, and protection, with police officers operating both as patrons and clients, depending on the context and actors involved. Also in northern India, we find that elected representatives are perceived—and manifest themselves—as "politician-kings" and "patron-protectors" (283), whose political clout hinges on their ability to protect (organizing violence if they must) and provision their followers, who, in turn, look upon their political representatives as "extraordinary kin" (283). Voters express their affection for (and reliance on) their political leaders in an idiom of caste competition and belonging, shared blood, and substantive bonds of divine kinship that trace back to Hindu gods, deities, and mythologies (Lucia Michelutti, chapter 12).

Heading westward and entering Bangladesh we meet "political bullies," or *mastans*, criminalizing street-level political life. They engage in muscular political brokerage, racketeering, politically motivated crime, and violence, and derive legitimacy and protection from the patronage they receive from political parties, which now and then rely on these "political bullies" to navigate the murkier and violent sides of Bangladeshi politics (Arild Engelsen Ruud, chapter 13). Moving south, we first learn about "remnants of patronage" among the Valaiyar community in Tamil Nadu, whose sense of history, place, and identity is traced and articulated through narratives of past royal patronage they received in the form of titles, land grants, and temples (Diane Miles, chapter 3). Also in South India, in Kerala, we learn about the (im)moralities of brokers

who use their social “connectedness” (366) to help prospective labor migrants to jobs in the Gulf. While these brokers like to think of themselves as munificent and claim to be involved in community development, their fees are often hefty, their motivations selfish, and they occasionally cheat. All the same, most would-be migrants continue to prefer these informal networks of mediation, often immersed into relations of kith and kin, over the formal channels provided by the bureaucracy and other state-sponsored organizations (Filippo Osella, chapter 16).

Continuing our journey westward we are introduced to “political fixers” in Gujarat, who are employed both by the poor, to help them access the state and its resources, and by elected politicians, who use them to “facilitate clientelistic exchanges” (197) and to win votes (Ward Berenschot, chapter 8). Entering Rajasthan, we find that politicians relate to their constituents as donors do to donees, making a hierarchical political arrangement that, in some ways, traces back to the so-called Jajmani system. Voters’ political preferences, Anastasia Piliavsky (chapter 6) shows ethnographically, are contingent on a politician’s commitment and capacity to act as a benevolent patron whose duty it is to “provide.” A pervasive idiom of “feeding and eating” (160) forms the moral basis for political relations, both literally through lavish election feasts, and metaphorically by politicians “getting things done” (174) for their voters. Both ways, “feeding and eating” is not merely transactional but generative of the lasting bonds and loyalties politicians need to win elections. Further westward, and crossing the India–Pakistan border, Nicolas Martin (chapter 14) emphasizes patronage’s darker sides, as in the Pakistani Punjab clientelistic exchanges that “reinforce existing power structures and undermine popular freedoms” and are “integral to processes of dispossession” (343). In addition to the chapters mentioned above, this volume carries contributions by Mattison Mines, Sumit Guha, David Gilmartin, Lisa Björkman, Pamela Price (with Dusi Srinivas), Steven Wilkinson, and Hildegard Diemberger (constraints of space prevent me from discussing these chapters individually), each of which variously engage practices, moral principles, and paradoxes of patronage.

A few years ago Rajeev Bhargava (2010, 56) lamented that “a critical tradition of political theory does not exist in India.” Most political treatises, he lamented, remain derivative from concepts and categories that emerged from the so-called “West.” In the current search for India-centric (and South Asian) political theory and thought, scholars would do well to take careful note of this volume and include in their canons presently “under-construction” the histories, politics, and moralities of patronage. While patronage is many things, this volume shows convincingly how in South Asia it is not a field of moral aberration but has its own moral sense, historical trajectories, rules, rewards, and drawbacks. Relations of patronage will, of course, continue to evolve and change. Yet, as a moral frame and political praxis, patronage is probably there to stay in South Asia, certainly for the foreseeable future, and this collection of essays therefore contributes greatly to capturing the character of contemporary political life in South Asia.

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